

Toronto “Coming of Age” Text Set

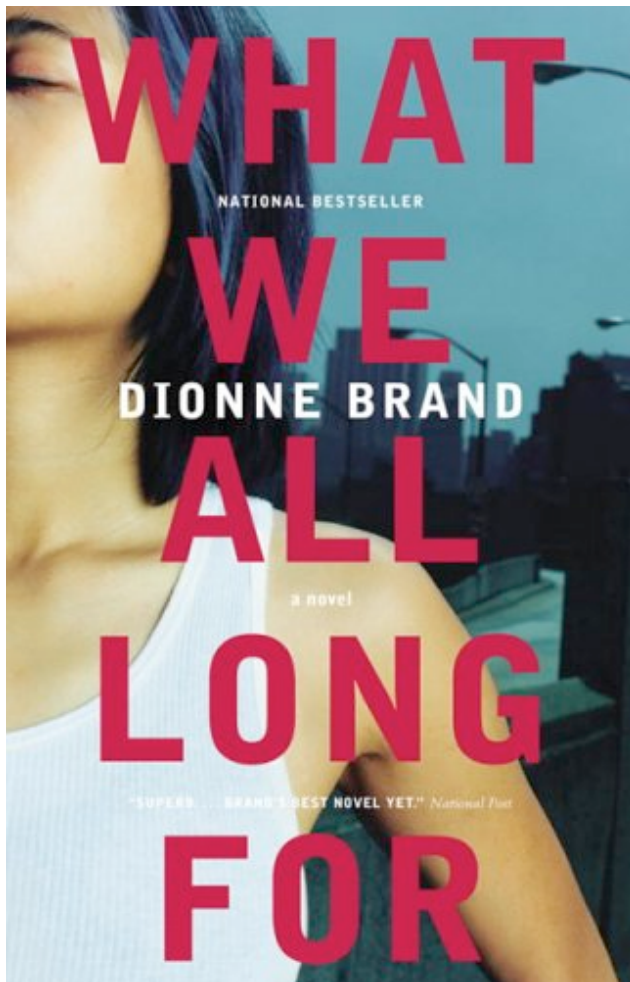
Introduction: Theme, Purpose, & Rationale

Toronto. Compared against seasoned, more exemplified, and static cities, Toronto is a place-in-transition. A city of constant change and contradictorily competing and combining identities, the challenge to put to words Toronto’s colourful chaos has been taken on by a select group of local artists, writers and organizations that aim to represent the manifold faces of this flawed yet fascinating city.

Teenagers. Trapped in a tumultuous stage of development between their tiny, carefree childhood cocoons and responsibility-laden adult realities, the search for identity is prioritized for the life of the average adolescent. Herein lies the parallel and potential: Toronto is a teenaged city, the equivalent to a teenager struggling in defining their own complicated identity. The teenaged students in our classrooms come from diverse roots, whether born and raised in or found their way to Toronto all students struggle with self-conception and in seeing themselves reflected in their studies.

Overlapping the geographical theme of Toronto and the genre theme of “Coming of Age” connects the personal to the public and allows for students to find themselves in the text but also in their city. It is hoped that the following ten texts represent the diverse perspectives, polygonal identities, and different experiences of Toronto and Toronto’s youth and also expose young Torontonians to the city before them.

1. Fiction Text



***What We All Long For* Dionne Brand**

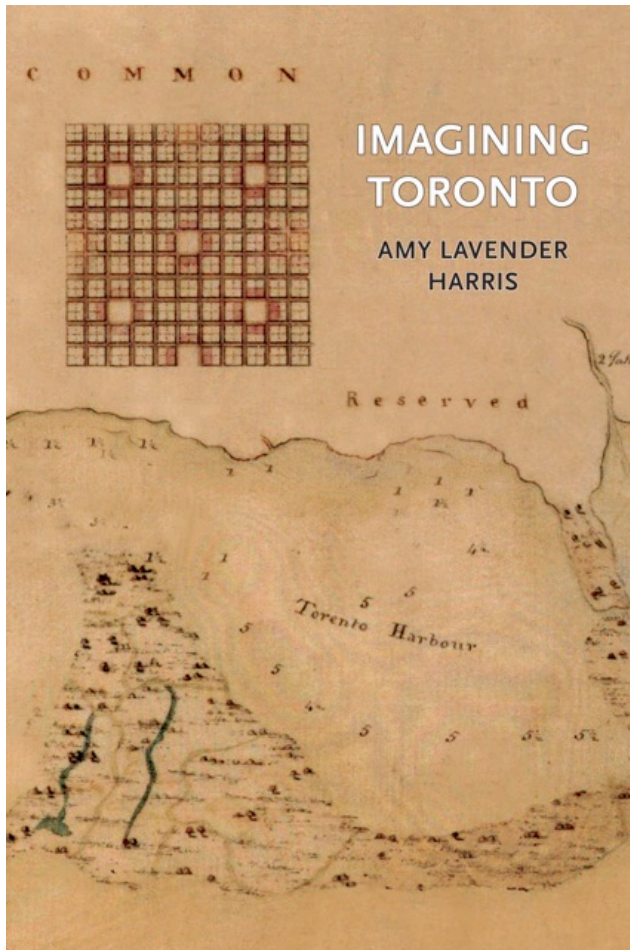
Summary

What We All Long For follows the lives of five interconnected teenaged and twentysomething Torontonians of diverse cultural roots, socioeconomic status and life experiences each searching for comprehension and their place within the living city, the sixth character in the novel. The question “What do you long for?” is imposed upon the characters alongside familiar contemporary Toronto backdrops such as Kensington Market, Queen Street and Richmond Hill.

Rationale

Dionne Brand’s detailed depiction of the many-layered complexities individuals bring to this city, shape themselves in the city, and in turn be shaped by the city is second to none. The realism of her characters and the familiarity of the locales allow for bridges between the text and the reader to be made. It is said that students should be able to see themselves in the curriculum, and with *What We All Long For*’s universal themes of family, love, belonging, and self-comprehension coupled with the localized mix of characters and settings that define Toronto, a complex capture of our world is created in a narrative that is the cornerstone to any Toronto canon.

2. Nonfiction Text



Imagining Toronto **Amy Lavender Harris**

Summary

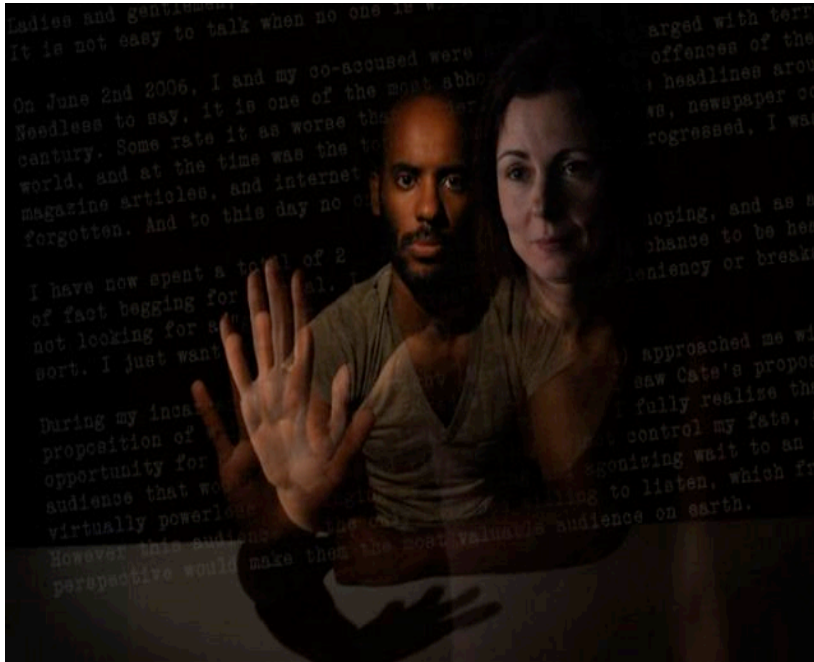
Imagining Toronto details Toronto's slow, continuous and somewhat contradictory "coming of age". Studying literary works written of it, Harris argues Toronto's texts "represent the only reliable map to the city within the city, the city at the centre of the map". In it Harris includes depictions of Toronto by prolific authors such as Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje. Harris concludes that, "despite the contemporary city's size and sophistication, Torontonians remain

rather quaintly prone to promoting self-aggrandizing myths designed to bolster civic self-image while concealing a neurotic sense of insecurity".

Rationale

Harris's *Imagining Toronto* allows for students to reach into the continually constructed identity of their city by being exposed to what came before. Harris, an author of Aboriginal and Anglo-Saxon descent, provides the starting point for understanding Toronto's unfinished identity creation. Books like *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The Torontonians* detail the pieces that make up this city and those who live in it. By understanding Toronto, we begin to understand more of how our environment plays a part in shaping our being.

3. Dramatic Text (Play)



Homegrown **Catherine Frid**

Summary

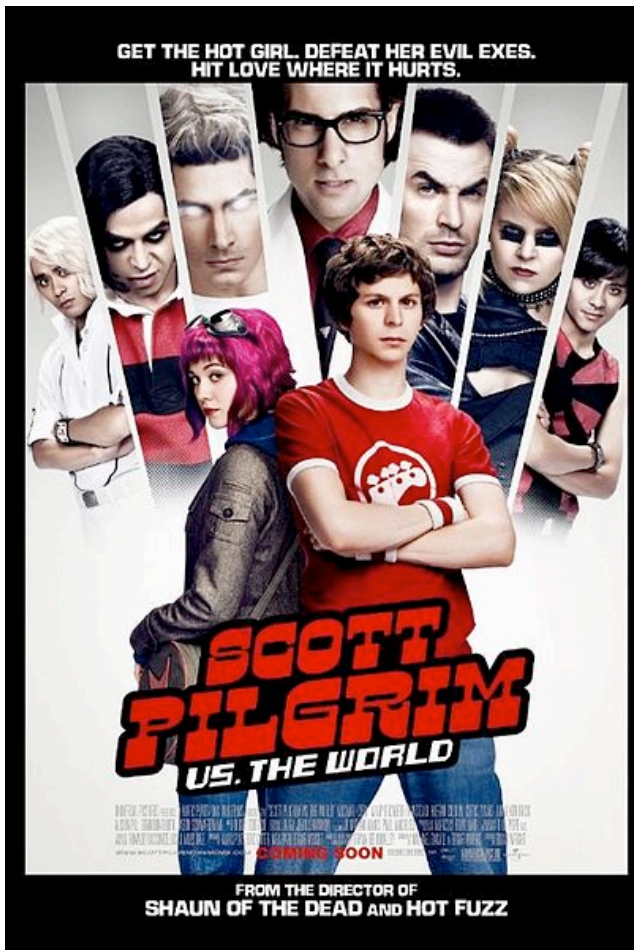
Performed at a
Toronto institution:
Theatre Passe Muraille,
Homegrown is a fact-
based drama about the
jail-time relationship
formed between a
writer-lawyer and a
convicted terrorist

Shareef Abdelhaleem. Abdelhaleem, was a member of the homegrown “Toronto 18” terrorist group charged in 2006 on the verge of carrying out their plot to blow up bank buildings at the intersection of Bay and Front Streets to cause a financial meltdown and monetarily profit from the aftereffects. The play caused great controversy for its sympathetic portrayal of Abdelhaleem and even had the Prime Minister’s Office (without previewing the play) issue a statement denouncing the play and any government money spent on its production (none; privately sponsored by TD bank ironically).

Rationale

The educational value of having students view *Homegrown* are as controversial as the play, to say the least. However, the question of how eighteen Toronto Muslim youth, most immigrating to Canada as children and some even born here, could plot an attack against their own people is significant when at that time terror was seen as coming from the outside. Examining the Toronto-specific socioeconomic, cultural, and societal factors that contributed to their ‘coming of age’ to radical action and also the sympathetic view of the play can all contribute to added perspective on controversial issues that all-too-often are dominated by media’s extreme reaction.

4. Film Text



Scott Pilgrim vs. The World

Edgar Wright (director)
Brian Lee O'Malley (author)

Summary

Based on the graphic novel series of the same name, this contemporary film set proudly in Toronto (a rarity), follows the adventures in love and life of a young indie musician named Scott Pilgrim. Our young hero falls in love with the girl of his dreams and must overcome the challenge of her “Seven Evil Exes” and his own self-doubt in order to win the right to be in a relationship with her. Respectful of the original graphic novel, the film adaptation is rich in its inclusion of

many Toronto’s neighbourhoods (The Annex) and symbols (streetcars).

Rationale

There was a conscious decision to include the film adaptation of *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* in this text set over the original graphic novel. Edgar Wright’s adaptation included many incredibly innovative uses of the elements of film (e.g. live action/cartoon animation hybridization, fast/slow motion, unique camera angles/perspectives) to mold a distinctive style for this film and in its portrayal of Toronto. In addition, the film version of *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* presents opportunities to be studied alongside the graphic text as an example of successful adaptations. The city’s role is critical to the film’s distinctive flavor and success while the film itself can be seen as a subtle love song to Toronto’s diverse and creative youth cultures.

5. Documentary Text



Invisible City Hubert Davis

Summary

Documenting the tension faced in the coming of age for black male youths in the Regent Park community, *Invisible City* brings what was once only seen by those affected for all of Toronto to see. The documentary focuses in on two outstanding young males: Mikey and Kendell, who want out; a black male teacher who returns to Regent Park to be their mentor; their Mothers who support them; and their surroundings that predispose them to fail. *Invisible City* is a powerful

portrayal of racial urban poverty, neighbourhood renewal, and hope in Toronto.

Rationale

To come of age, a person must make decisions that will shape who or what they would like to be in the future. *Invisible City* outlines in a Canadian context the issues of race, masculinity, poverty/class, society, and disconnect/isolation that bear weight on these coming of age decisions. Exposing our students to the systemic dilemmas that other youths their age face is an excellent lesson in perspective. The stories of Mikey and Kendell are raw and relatable, even if the students we end up teaching are more or less privileged. Being conscious of one's privilege, being empathetic, and being grateful are some of the most valuable things teachers can impart on students.

6. Graphic Novel Text



Skim **Mariko Tamaki**

Summary

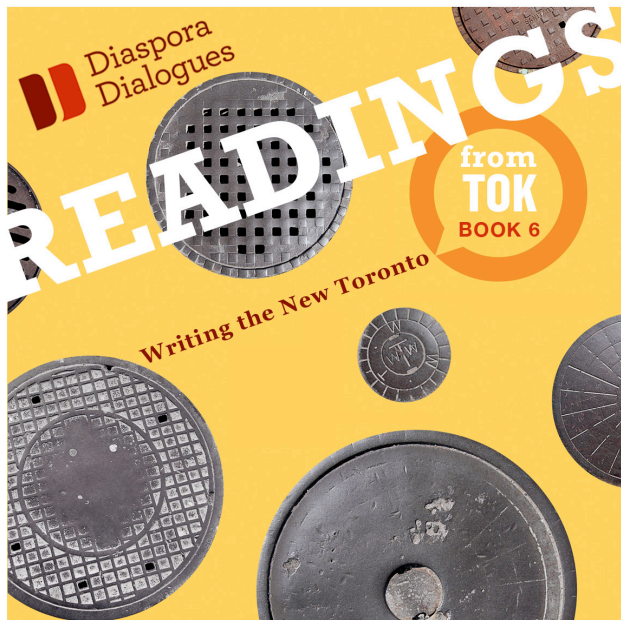
Kimberly Keiko Cameron, a.k.a. Skim is a sixteen year old in a Toronto all-girls Catholic high school. She is a mixed, queer, and slightly overweight Wiccan (a nice cross-section of the Toronto populace) with few friends who believes her school to be a “goldfish tank of stupid”. After the popular girl’s boyfriend commits suicide (rumoured to be queer) and Skim herself shares a kiss with Ms. Archer, her English teacher, her life becomes quite complicated. Beyond these surface-level complications lies

a story that targets deeper issues like everyday racism, adolescent mistrust of adults, the temporary and fragile nature of high school friendships, and that love is... well, love is complicated.

Rationale

The graphic novel format is ever increasing in its appeal to high school-aged students and educators alike. The multidimensional nature of the characters and poignant themes in *Skim* set it apart from other graphic novels in that the storyline is not trumped by the artwork. Instead, both work together to provide excellent chances to teach reading between the lines, or in this case: picture boxes, and dealing with relevant Toronto-specific topics and interests while still appealing to the teenaged mind. *Skim* will be a manga that both student and teacher enjoy discussing and analyzing.

7. Community Foundation as Text



Drop in after a long day at the office for a refreshing sampling of Toronto's best and brightest writers!

David Layton, Martin Mordecai, Alicia Elliott and Lynda Allison read from their Toronto-set stories. Hosted by Antanas Sileika

Thursday, May 19 6:00 PM
Ben McNally Books, 366 Bay Street **FREE**

For more details visit www.diasporadialogues.com

Diaspora Dialogues **Helen Walsh (President)**

Summary

Beginning in 2005, *Diaspora Dialogues* is a Toronto literary organization that supports Toronto writers, of all ages, in producing literature that reflects the diverse and distinctive city of Toronto. Focusing on aiding immigrant writers share their stories, Diaspora Dialogue offers many different mentoring programs and community support systems directed towards youths finding their own words, encouraging reading and literary appreciation by connecting Toronto authors and the

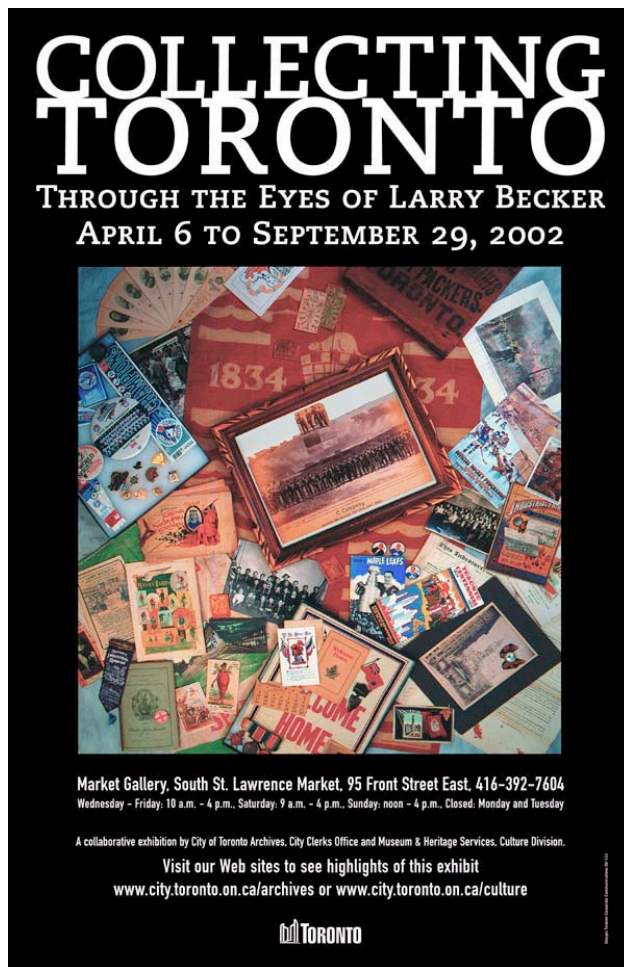
public, and publishes an annual anthology of short fiction and poetry entitled, *TOK*:

Writing the New Toronto.

Rationale

Integrating an organization such as *Diaspora Dialogues* into a course, either within the curriculum or encouraging participation outside of school hours, would be the best kind of application for students. There is nothing more authentic as an assessment than real life experience. Having students' coming of age story honed, performed, or published by both peers and experts, participating in the mentorship program, or just implementing the teacher-based resources they provide on their website would ensure that the diverse voices in one's own classroom could be heard and strengthened.

8. History as Text



City of Toronto Archives

<http://www.toronto.ca/archives/>

Summary

The extensive, rich online database of the City of Toronto Archives amasses an endless amount of historically significant artifacts, photographs, and resources, as well as arranges exhibitions and promotes the preservation of history that serve to illustrate Toronto's varied stories of old. The City of Toronto Archives is available both online and in its main building near Casa Loma.

Rationale

In addition to the database of photographs that could serve as many minds on activities or the beginning inspiration to creative writing pieces, the City of Toronto Archives also makes real life applications of Toronto-based fiction with exhibitions on Toronto-centric literature. However, perhaps the best feature of the City of Toronto Archives is in its potential to make novels based in Toronto come alive with walking educational tours. Many fieldtrips could be organized during or after the study of a novel such as Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* or Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* where students would be able to see and explore areas of the texts they are studying. As a teacher I would absolutely take the opportunity to "trace the footsteps" of characters in the novels we study with students interacting with the actual setting (place as text) in such spaces.

9. Photography as Text



Daily Dose of Imagery
Sam Javanrouh
<http://wvs.toleftpixel.com/>

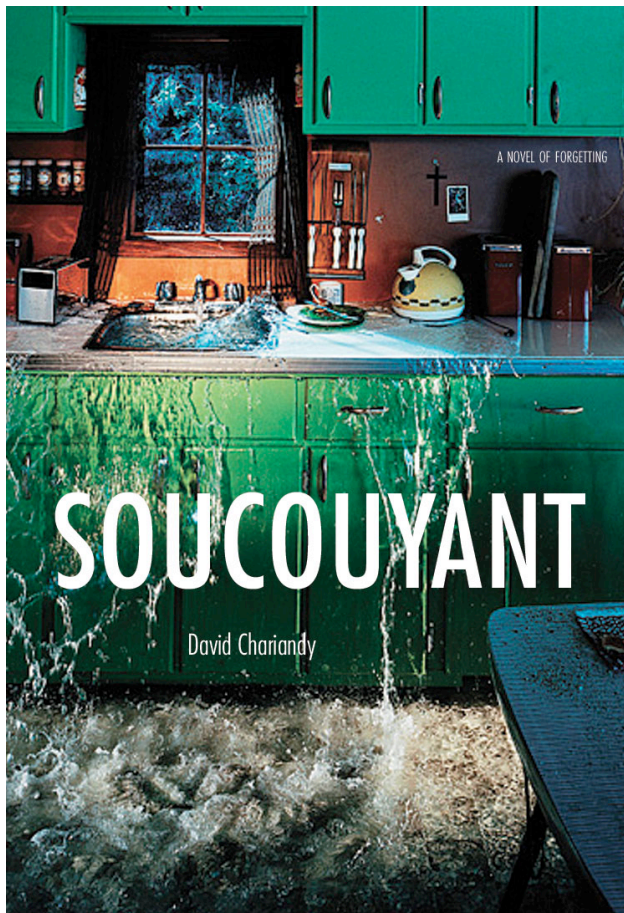
Summary

Daily Dose of Imagery is quite self-explanatory in that every day professional photographer Sam Javanrouh documents the life of the average Torontonians with a photograph snapped and uploaded to his site every day. Javanrouh's dedication to his photographic craft has allowed him to capture many sublime Toronto moments and contributed to building his own visual version of Toronto's coming of age story.

Rationale

Toronto's identity is constantly being fashioned by the people that exist in it and with many forms of very different mediums. *Daily Dose of Imagery* is but one skilled example of one person's interpretation of and way of seeing Toronto. Not only could Sam Javanrouh serve as inspiration to students in expressing their own takes on Toronto but also spark the explorative side of them as well. Many creative writing assignments could be built upon reflecting or expanding on images and *Daily Dose of Imagery's* quintessentially-Toronto photography is second to none.

10. Fiction Text



Soucouyant **David Chariandy**

Summary

Blending multiple themes into one cohesive Canadian experience, Chariandy creates a wonderfully poetic novel based on Trinidadian myth, personal memory, and the immigration experience of a first generation Torontonion. Set in suburban Scarborough and the Caribbean, *Soucouyant* manages to bridge both old and new worlds, with a man revisiting the old house he grew up in to find that both nothing

and everything has changed. Mixing old memories with present realities, the unnamed narrator must make sense of everything to find himself once again.

Rationale

Soucouyant is the link between the student and the text. With its incorporation of many Caribbean-specific myths in a Scarborough-context, the exposure to these Caribbean stories brings forth the opportunity to allow students to bring in or research on their own cultural myths. Allowing opportunity for students to understand their background more or to express their own knowledge of their culture serves to help each student gain a greater sense of self. More importantly, it also allows for students to take on the role of the teacher and establish the classroom as a place where education comes not just from the texts.